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## School shootings

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## Abstract

School shooters are bullied loners with a psychiatric history and an obsession with violent popular culture - this seems to be an image of the typical school shooter in the popular imagination. Empirical studies, however, suggest that, to date, no reliable profile of school shooters exist. This follows in part from the simple statistical logic that the number of school shootings is relatively low. Known shooters have different family backgrounds and educational histories, the socioeconomic context differs and their age varies considerably, between eleven and twenty-five years old. Researchers generally offer two distinct types of causes: personal and social. Whatever the scientific angle, the researchers always conclude that drawing a unambiguous picture of a school shooter is not possible.

Despite the fact that the empirical findings so far have been in favor of heterogeneity of the phenomenon, there seems to exist a popular view of school shooters. The popular perceptions of school shooters can be a problem regarding prevention. On one hand, influenced by incorrect perceptions, one could easily overlook warning signals, which a seemingly nice, popular student may send. On the other hand, this could damage harmless students if they are stigmatized by others because they meet this image. Even more creative interpretations of school shootings interpret the cause of these crimes in various ways. Some filmmakers portray social factors such as bullying and hyper-masculinity as motives for the shooters, while others portray personal causes such as psychiatric problems. They often use a number of clichés, such as the isolated, somewhat weird loner who is bullied, to paint the picture of a school shooter or, alternatively, a youngster who becomes a suspect because of these clichés. Interestingly, neither in public debates nor in academic discussions are

school shootings interpreted as meaningful behavior, and an existential crisis of the perpetrator never is considered as the genesis of this crime.

There is one commonality which can contribute to our understanding of what motivates these perpetrators: they all announce their plans in some way. This “leaking” comes in various forms. It can be indirect - for example, in drawings - or direct - for example, manifestos in the form of videos on the Internet. These expressions present a valuable source for understanding how school shooters see the world and their own position in it. An analysis of these *egodocuments* showed in the present study that all of the seven studied shooters express existential dilemmas. More importantly, the documents showed that these shooters do not find a balance between existential concerns and the facts of life. For example, the fact that we are all mortal is counterweighed by the idea that the school shooting will make them world-famous and never-forgotten, immortal in a way. In another example, the fact that existential freedom makes us fully responsible for our lives, including our failures, is counterweighed by school shooters by blaming others for their misery and ultimately for the shooting. The notion that they “have to do this” because others made them can be found in the expressions of all perpetrators in this study. Or, counterweighing the fact that they are average boys, maybe sometimes rejected by others, they create an identity of an avenging angel, a god-like person who takes revenge and kills inferiors.

Denying the fact that their crime is a meaningless act of violence, a murdering of innocent people, they call their deed a revolution or a war. The idea of solving existential dilemmas seemingly drives the studied school shooters to construct reality in a way that infuses their life (and death) with meaning. In other words, school shooters in the present study try to solve their existential dilemmas with violence. The exaggerated myths of becoming immortal, scapegoating others, and declaring themselves god-like all indicate an

existential crisis. This crisis spurs a search for meaning. Traditionally, religion is one of the major resources used to generate meaning in life. School shooters find meaning in their violent deeds. In this way, school shootings seem to be meaning-giving constructs. This does not lead to the argument that school shootings are religiously motivated but does indicate the implicit religious dimension of these crimes. In order to understand the possible religious dimensions, a broader definition of religion was considered in this study: Bailey's (1997) concept of *implicit religion*.

To identify the implicit religion of school shootings, a method developed by Schnell (2004) was used. She argued that three structures - myth, ritual and the experience of transcendence - are common to all explicit religions. When associated with personally meaningful content, these structures become representatives of implicit religiosity. They then turn into personal myth, personal rituals and subjectively accessible transcendent experiences. Not only were these structures found in every individual case, notable commonalities were found in the personal myths, rituals and transcendent experiences of the studied school shooters. First, in the category of personal myths, they portray their deeds as a war between good and evil. In the myths of the perpetrators, their identity changes from average school boy into a god-like avenging angel who is prepared to die like a martyr. To them there seemingly is no other way to solve their problems than to execute their violent plans. In addition, they apparently assume that the shooting will make them famous and ensure they are never forgotten. Second, in the category of personal rituals, the studied perpetrators collect weapons, which also have a symbolic function. Some even name their weapons. The shooting itself is a performative form of violence which resembles religious rituals. Third, in the category of transcendent experiences, the studied perpetrators express feelings of superiority and the experience of a more god-like self. They identify themselves with other school

shooters or powerful role-models and create feelings of being of great significance. They express that with the shooting they will change the world.

The present study suggests a new perspective of existential concerns and implicit religion regarding the motives of school shooters. This new perception of school shootings as meaning-giving constructs supports the idea that to the perpetrators the school shooting is a rational act and that the deed is a meaning-giving construct which reduces the existential crisis of these adolescents. School shootings can be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by implicit religion. This theoretical perspective could lead to a new understanding of school shootings as meaningful behavior. Moreover, this leads to questioning the common perspective on school shootings in terrorism studies. A number of studies explicitly exclude school shooters when they define the term *lone wolf* because lone wolves have political or religious motives, and the researchers state that such motives cannot be found in school shootings. Spaaij (2012) pointed out that the true motives of lone wolves are very difficult to determine and that “lone wolves tend to create their own individualized ideologies from a mixture of broader political, religious or social aims and personal frustration and aversion” (p. 20). The comparison of existential concerns and implicit religion of the studied school shooters and a number of lone wolf terrorists showed that myth, ritual and transcendent experiences are present in all studied cases. Sometimes the myths are more personal, and sometimes they are influenced by existing religions or political movements, but it appears that their violent deed is a meaning-giving construct for the perpetrators involved. Notably, in the egodocuments of the analyzed cases a number of common themes were found:

- The deed is justified as an act of revenge. As avenging angels, the shooters retaliate for injustice against them or people like themselves.

- Seeking for some kind of transcendental reward is a theme. To some it is the expectation of paradise, to others eternal fame, but it is always a kind of reward that lasts longer than earthly life.
- Perpetrators feel that they are chosen to fight evil. To them they sacrifice themselves for the greater good.
- Perpetrators do not see their crime as a meaningless act of violence but as an act of war or revolution. To them it is a fight between good and evil, and they express this with apocalyptic language.

The perpetrators in the present study share obvious similarities, and therefore it should be considered not to exclude school shooters from studies of lone wolves. Studying these perpetrators as one phenomenon will enlarge the body of data and thus make more profound research possible. Eventually this will deepen our understanding of the motives of these perpetrators and possibly help us to identify more effective interventions with the purpose of prevention.

Currently, the detection of warning signals relating to school shootings is emphasized by policymakers, school boards and safety experts. But worrisome behavior is only the visible tip of the iceberg. If the suggested view on the cause of school shootings is followed, education professionals should be aware that an existential crisis, which apparently lies at the root of the genesis of a school shooting, often stays unnoticed. Schools need to offer room for existential questions and train teachers how to approach these issues.